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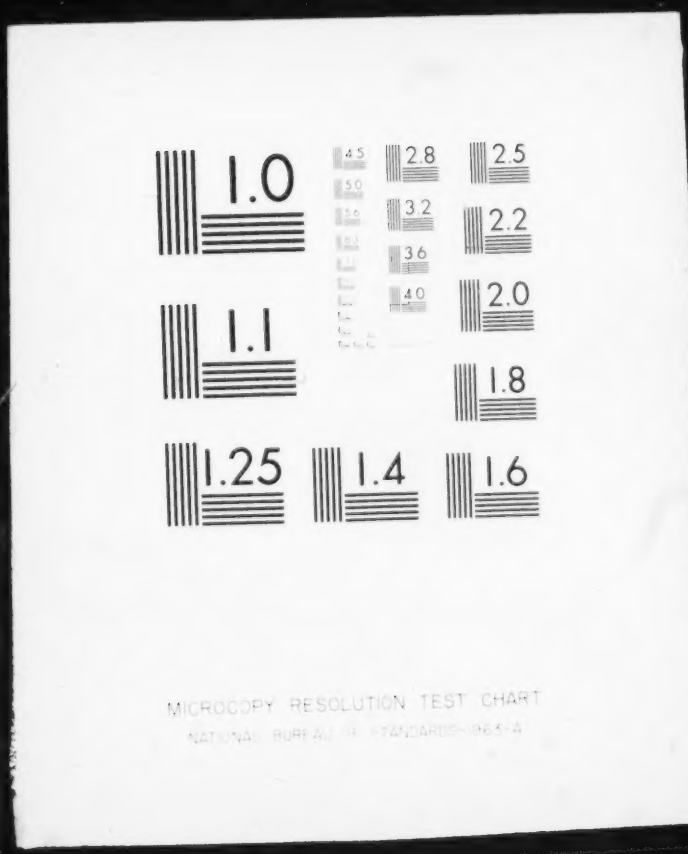

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ABSTRACT

This report focuses on the nature and structure of the question and its use as an educational technique enabling the language teacher to involve his students in the use of the target language. Discussion concentrates on: (1) the question in the basic level class, (2) the question as a testing technique, (3) the question as a vocabulary activator in the second- and third-year reading program, (4) the question in advanced language study, and (5) a review of the nature of the question. (RL)

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THE QUESTION AS A TECHNIQUE IN FOREIGN-LANGUAGE TEACHING

by Dolly D. Harrell

Since language is not a mere combination of sounds or letters but a segment of life itself,[1] the student will be most effectively challenged to learn and use a second language in situations charged with meaning. The structure of language, we are assured,[2] is crucial in the development of logical thought. One of the most efficient ways to assimilate foreign-language structure is through direct, personal experiences in communication. It follows, then, that the learner must be truly involved with the language if he is to become effectively articulate or, in a true sense, literate.

Many standard works such as those by Nelson Brooks, Mary Finocchiaro, Robert Lado, and Wilga Rivers[3] contain indispensable lists, sequences of activities, and general advice on leading the student to use language for communication; however, success in language learning must always depend to a very great extent upon the skills of the teacher. The intelligent use of questions, more perhaps than any other technique, enables the teacher to involve his students in the reality of using the language they are learning as a tool for communication.

THE QUESTION IN THE BASIC LEVEL CLASS

Questions for teaching, at the basic level especially, must so involve the learner that when he has mastered a given sequence, he becomes eager to extend his mastery in a variety of directions. The skillful use of questions will let the student demonstrate his awareness of content, will insure that the patterns he is mastering really mean something to him, and will encourage him to "play" with language, applying it to himself and to others.

Even before the student has learned the formal words of interrogation, the resourceful teacher can devise many types of question activities to help the student internalize the language:

1. Incomplete sentences with suspended intonation which the student answers by completing the statement.
2. Statements asking for confirmation or denial and requiring repetition of the statement in some mode.
3. Questions in which the student is given the choice of an answer. (The brief, simple answers elicited by this type of question, in addition to being easy to use in the class, develop the skill of selecting essentials and omitting non-essentials characteristic of normal interchange.)
4. Activities in which the student labels items in a picture, using appropriate vocabulary and syntax. (Gradually the student will be led to add adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, etc. to differentiate and enhance his utterances.)
5. Questions cued by hand signals requiring changes in syntax. (For these to be effective, they must involve the participants personally. they should never be merely mechanical drills.)
6. Silent questions. By his expression the teacher asks, "Is that exactly what you mean?", "Do you want to say more?"; or, silently addressing the rest of the class, "Who can help us get the answer right?". (Ceding the stage to the students encourages them to take over oral communication.)

As utterances are learned and practiced, the need for the type of drill provided by pattern practices is easily recognized by the student. When pattern hypnosis – the unthinking shaping of responses, either correct or incorrect – sets in, questions asking who, what, where, when, why, and how serve to keep the meaning of the pattern in focus.

As soon as a student has mastered a specific utterance, he should be led to generalize and to begin, within the framework of the utterance and vocabulary that he knows well, to bring his own reaction and tastes into play. In this way, he will learn some structure, for example, agreement of nouns and adjectives, through a purely social experience in which extensions or projections of what he has already learned will or will not work.

As the teacher's use of questions makes the interchange really pertinent, the student begins to feel a need to know in the new medium, and is easily encouraged to fashion his own questions. Using questions that meet the student at his own stage of achievement and interest – questions that really "make a difference" – allows the teacher and student to enter into cumulative communication, and the patterns of syntax he is seeking to establish become truly functional.

Whenever possible the student should be given the initiative. An important part of learning a language is letting it take root with a minimum of interference. For instance, formulating questions emerging from panel topics using specific structures and pre-established vocabulary lists may be made the student's responsibility. Or, to make learning more exciting and relevant, the teacher can launch a discussion by choosing or asking the students to choose a topic of interest, writing three or four new vocabulary items on the chalkboard, and allowing the students to exchange ideas, moderating now and then if necessary.

Questions based on a current topic or well-known personality are excellent ways to begin a class. For example:

Structure being mastered: pronouns. Topic: presenting a bill.
Stimulus: "To whom do I give the bill – to you, Mr. Benny?"
Answer sought: "No, don't give it to me; give it to him." Or, "No, don't give it to us; give it to them."

Structure being mastered: adverbs or prepositions of place. Topic: orbiting the moon.
Stimulus: "Where was the module at 12:00? 3:00? 6:00?"
Answer sought: "It was near_____; far from_____, behind_____, between_____. . . . ."

Structure being mastered: conditional sentences involving use of subjunctive. Topic: wire tapping.
Stimulus: "If you were a policeman and you believed two men were planning a crime, would you listen to their private conversations?"
Answer sought: Any honest conviction involving an if clause and a conclusion.

Structure being mastered: comparison of adjectives or adverbs. Topic: air pollution (or styles in hair, dress, or music).
Stimulus: "Is the air cleaner in Chicago than in New York?" "Will 'ye-ye' last longer than jazz?"

The topic is more valuable if it will support three types of questions – the specific, the general, and the question having direct application to the individual. Students should be encouraged to support their preferences and opinions with facts. This not only elicits debate, but also does much to create an interest

in reading foreign-language periodicals, even before linguistic readiness has been attained.

Words and phrases sufficiently made our own, says one authority, "become atoms of meaning; packets of information, capable of activating other atoms."[4] Once the teacher establishes this chain reaction, many of the problems of motivation are solved. The student who has experienced thinking and communicating in a foreign language will take intensive drill willingly and profitably; he is ready to derive the maximum benefit from a good language laboratory program. Those exercises which cue the student's response, systematically but naturally reinforcing his replies much as individuals reinforce each other in normal interchange, are of particular value. If the student's responses are recorded successively on one or several class tapes, his performance may be analyzed for error by use of a pre-planned form that enables the teacher to diagnose problems and prescribe drill to overcome weaknesses.

Questions may be used to orient, involve, pace, pinpoint, dramatize, and individualize. Whatever their use, they should deviate from set patterns frequently enough to sustain interest. Illogical or ridiculous questions can occasionally be an excellent tool for learning, provided human values are scrupulously safeguarded. The correction of the obviously false or incongruous is an excellent reinforcement for vocabulary.

The teacher using questions should adhere to certain procedures, some of them long accepted as standard:

1. Include all members of the class, but avoid set recitation patterns. (Intra-group relationships, when they have been established, help to establish the order of participation, often on a voluntary basis.)
2. Be quietly generous with praise, especially when it is the product of real effort. (When success comes easily, an appropriate reward may be a more challenging question, or students who have done well may be permitted to work in smaller groups to prepare a series of questions of their own for use in the class.)
3. Use a pre-arranged, silent signal to indicate error so that the student can correct himself if he is able. (If he cannot, the teacher must guide the student to the correct answer.)
4. Occasionally break the monotony of routine class procedures by asking one student a group or series of questions. (The person selected, far from feeling put upon, will be proud to have been able to make a substantial contribution.)
5. Be wary of doing too much reinforcement work during a question session. (Generally, short sessions of questions and answers should be reinforcement-free.)
6. Summarize the answers occasionally, giving credit to the contributors by name. (This reinforcement of self-esteem may well be as profitable to both student and teacher as the reinforcement of syntax.)

THE QUESTION AS A TESTING TECHNIQUE

The superior teacher will use questions freely to orient, involve, and cue his students, but he will not test their mastery until he has thoroughly taught the knowledge and skills to be tested. Premature testing destroys the learner's security in his knowledge and his confidence in the teacher. If pride in achieve-

ment is the finest stimulation, is not the obverse certainly true? Nelson Brooks[5] and others[6] offer substantial aid in preparing tests which accurately indicate the student's growth. Teaching quizzes are a valuable tool which indicate the student's day-to-day progress and give direction to remedial activities. But, long or short, the valid test is always on familiar material and provides a real opportunity for pride in one's accomplishments.

Many beginning language texts now teach the student to write as he gains oral mastery, usually employing copying as the first step. Written questions for the first level should be varied and always practiced under guidance. Types of questions that may be used in testing writing include:

Lexical keys of highly specific orientation, (yesterday/John/see/Paul/party/at)
Parallel transformations based on a model pair,
(I eat. I see.
I have eaten. I have _____.)
Substitutions with cued adaptations,
(My father is Mexican;
I _____ also.)
Confirmation-seeking questions addressed to a second person to be answered in the first person, (Do you like caviar?)
Information- or logical response-seeking questions involving familiar vocabulary and structure (What are the winter months in Colombia?)

THE QUESTION AS A VOCABULARY ACTIVATOR IN THE SECOND AND THIRD YEAR READING PROGRAM

Since the reading experiences on the beginning level are designed to reinforce systematically the control of basic structures, the accompanying question techniques must often bear a close resemblance to the sentences contained in the reading material in order to stimulate ready oral response. However, once reading per se is begun, and the student is introduced to increasingly rich and representative selections enjoyable in their own right, question types change. Some questions must be designed to help the student master techniques for reading comprehension. These questions provide drill in word-order variations, slot recognition, and identification of structural referents and antecedents. Other types of questions, equally important, provide for the activation of vocabulary, leading toward intelligent self-expression.

A new college series, MLA Continuing Spanish,[7] is outstanding for the variety and effectiveness of such questions. Its reading selections, with some exceptions, are dynamic and thought-provoking, and are representative in genre, topic, and region. The questions which accompany them are often vitally interesting:

1. Pure content questions to establish meaning (lexical keys, either/or choices, and direct questions covering the same items in a three-way approach).
2. Choice questions which often lead to animated, constructive debate.
3. Personal application questions which bring forth enthusiastic replies because the learner is well-prepared and personally involved.

Although some feel the work needs further editing, unit for unit it is a highly effective teaching device concentrating the student's learning energies on

specific and general language experiences of absorbing interest. Many of its exercises, with adaptations, can serve admirably as stimuli for guided composition.

Such materials prompt and bring order to inquiry, heightening the student's desire to learn. The teacher using such a course of study often finds himself acting as a moderator, and his own questions may be highly abbreviated and dynamic in their brevity. He may find himself saying simply – but at the precise, crucial moment – "And. . .?", "Therefore. . .?", "On the other hand. . .?".

Thought-provoking sound films and occupationally oriented programs of reading rich in culture and intellectual content may quite possibly prove to be invaluable sources of questions for language learning. Although the French Government has, perhaps, made the greatest advances in this field, such specialized reading should soon be available in many languages to future doctors, social workers, engineers, diplomats, farmers, and others for whom work, culture, and cultivation of the intellect will not necessarily be mutually exclusive. The increasing interest in scientific advances makes the development of these materials inevitable, and the task is facilitated since the high frequency of immediately recognizable cognates in technical vocabulary renders it virtually international.

THE QUESTION IN ADVANCED LANGUAGE STUDY

At all levels the teacher using questions must never forget that the student is an individual, and he must fashion his teaching with the learner in mind. The most effective questions are those that start with what the student is, feels, and thinks, particularly in his vital relationships with others. Teaching does not stop there, but, certainly, it should start there. Further, some portion of the questions asked a student should cause him to reach far enough beyond where he stands to insure growth, although the challenge should not be so complex that it results only in destructive frustrations. The student at advanced levels should, by virtue of his greater experience, also be offered the opportunity to deal with semantic differences – to choose, for instance, whether he would, under given conditions, glance, look, inspect, view, witness, peek, peer, be a spectator of, perceive, decry, distinguish, recognize, scan, stare, or watch.[8]

The best questions at any level lead the student to a deeper understanding of experiences that may previously have been partially recognized, but not fully assimilated, appreciated, or projected. The teacher's perpetual task is to develop the learner's skills of generalization and lead him to a realization of his full potential as an individual. The student will instinctively welcome questions which say to him:

Define your tastes.
Reflect your own reaction to great literature.
Demonstrate the universality of your sense of the esthetic.
Confirm yourself as a moral force. (Defend your essential convictions.)
Demonstrate your artistic discrimination by saying with skill exactly what you mean.

To be sure, the student must be able to sense that the teacher who leads him in these exercises is no mere juggler of phrases or moderator of opinions, but is capable of using language skillfully, tastefully, and effectively. Theodore Brameld[9] draws an important distinction between the experimentalist attitude and the "careful, scholarly consideration of contrasting viewpoints" with this question, "Shall we, when so many positivist influences are at work, present no strong case for our experience?". If the teacher is to succeed in making the case for the experience of the learned through the ages, he must have real and vital answers of his own.

WHAT IS A QUESTION?

1. It is an invitation to participate, a sharing of common ground with the learner.
2. It is a reasonable challenge to the individual, posed in full appreciation of his potential.
3. It is a tool for involvement, a catalyst which causes a particular bit of knowledge to become a part of the answerer.
4. It is a picture, real or imaginary, asking to be interpreted by an articulate observer.
5. It is a map showing the student where he is and pointing the way to his fulfillment.
6. It is an acknowledgment of the gleam in the student's eye, the reassurance of the worth of his reaction.
7. It is a stepping stone to a conclusion, a helping hand extended to the student, often before he asks for it, but seldom before he needs it.
8. It is an expression of an honest need to know, a team project in which the answerer plays a vital role in the discovery.
9. It is a type of group "priming" when it is directed to one who will give a considered answer and help set a good pace for other learners.
10. It is a temporization, calling upon the student to think out conclusions of his own.

For the master teacher, a question is a clearly and carefully set stage. Whatever it says, it must first and last say, "Be articulate!", "Get down to cases!", "Enrich your mind by being definite!", "Strengthen your reason by being concrete!".

NOTES

[1]William F. Mackey, Language Teaching Analysis (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1965), p. 26.

[2]J. McV. Hunt, Toward a Theory of Guided Learning Development (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois, 1965).

[3]For further information on these activities see: Nelson Brooks, Language and Language Learning, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1964); Mary Finocchiaro, Teaching Children Foreign Languages (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Robert Lado, Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Wilga M. Rivers, The Psychologist and the Foreign-Language Teacher (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964).

[4]Mackey, p. 26.

[5]"Tests and Measurements," Language and Language Learning, pp. 199-225.

[6]The "Instructor's Manual" to Continuing Spanish: A Project of the Modern Language Association, 2 vols. (New York: American Book Company, 1967) is excellent for multiple-choice items. See also Robert Lado, Language Testing: The Construction and Use of Foreign Language Tests (1961; rpt. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

[7]Continuing Spanish.

[8]C.G.S. McKeown, A Study in Perception (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ., 1953).

[9]Education for the Emerging Age (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 152.